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Searching for Taboos in Doctoral Education

An Exploratory Journey

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Washington

Have you ever wondered about the topics that your doctoral students do not bring up during advising sessions or in doctoral seminars? What topics do your students not discuss amongst one another? What topics do you not discuss with your colleagues regarding your doctoral students? What matters are very important to your students but remain unspoken? Have you wondered why a curious silence hangs over you and your students regarding certain issues?

In the following paper, I will take you along on my journey into searching for taboos in doctoral education, which is where I collected my first impressions on this subject. The terrains that I focused on were two research universities, one in the United States, and one in Japan. As different geographic locations within different cultures use different terminologies, I will begin with an explanation of definitions.

According to the Oxford dictionary, the term *taboo* is “a social or religious custom prohibiting or forbidding discussion of a particular practice or forbidding association with a particular person, place, or thing”.

In the United States, doctoral candidates are called *doctoral students*. This term does not mean that they are pupils in a belittling sense; students do not feel degraded with this identification. Professors in the United States who advise doctoral students are identified as *doctoral advisors*. This term is the equivalent in Germany’s current terminology to *doctoral supervisor*, or the older terms, *Doktorvater* and *Doktormutter*, which mean doctoral father or doctoral mother, and which indicate a close and hierarchical relationship.

In Japan, the English terms that are used in reference to doctoral students and advisors are the same as in the United States. The term *faculty* in the United States refers to teaching and research staff of a university or college. This term is distinct from the German term, *Fakultät*, which means a group of departments under one organization unit. In contrast, research universities in the United States refer to such entities as a *college*

or *school*, for example, the College of Arts and Sciences, and the School of Architecture and Planning.

In the United States and Japan, I found taboos in three domains of doctoral education:

- Taboos between advisors and doctoral students.
- Taboos amongst doctoral students.
- Taboos amongst doctoral advisors.

This exploratory journey does not end with a final conclusion, but rather, it leads to more questions.

Background

Let me explain the lens that I bring to this journey. I have undertaken three comprehensive, national surveys in the United States inquiring into the careers of PhD graduates between five and 15 years after degree completion; these surveys have also included retrospective assessments of the students' doctoral experiences. These surveys asked what PhD holders did after they earned their degrees, and, considering the period of time since degree completion, also asked the PhD holders' opinions on the quality and usefulness of their past studies.

In addition to these national PhD career path surveys, I also interviewed more than 400 doctoral students about issues such as transitioning from one stage in their doctoral studies to another, as from coursework to dissertation research, and asked about reasons for long time-to-degree or doctoral attrition.

Where and How I Searched for Taboos¹

To begin, I started my search at my current home in Seattle, at the University of Washington, where I talked to doctoral students in spaces they would feel safe, often times over dinner at my home. I also talked to professors in an informal atmosphere over dinner. After these interviews, I went back to my own doctoral alma mater, the University of California Berkeley, where I talked with a psychologist at the university's counseling center, who had fielded discussion with many doctoral students during her career. Following this stage, I searched for taboos at Nagoya Uni-

¹ I would like to thank the following people for their support during this journey: Roxana, Chiappa, Angela Ginorio, Shirley Hune, Matje Koprda, Li Min, Carol Morrison, Helen Remick, Priti Ramamurthy, Sheila Slaughter, and Jiro Takai.

versity, Japan, where I served as a visiting professor for three months in 2014. At Nagoya University, I mainly interviewed international doctoral students from European countries or Japanese doctoral students who spoke fluent English, because my Japanese language skills are rudimentary.

In summary, I interviewed experts, or in other words, people who were intricately involved with doctoral education. I conducted my interviews in the form of individual in-depth interviews, in-person focus group sessions, and via e-mail exchanges.

To inform my interviews, I reviewed findings from three national PhD career paths surveys in the United States that the Center for Innovation and Research in Graduate Education conducted between 1996 and 2008.

Experiences During My Search for Taboos

In both the United States and Japan, I sent lunch and dinner invitations to professors who had at least five or more years of experience advising doctoral students. In the invitation letters, I explained the purpose as follows: Regarding taboos in doctoral education, who does not talk to whom, about what, and why? Interestingly, only women professors responded to my invitation in the United States, compared to in Japan, where mostly men accepted my invitation. One possible explanation for this difference in Japan is that the proportion of women professors at Nagoya University was 5 % at the time I requested interviews. I have no explanation for the absence of men among the American participants.

Many of the respondents of the university in the United States were “women of color”, meaning they were Asian American, Latin American, or Southeast Asian. Mainly, these women were professors in social sciences and humanities departments, such as planning, education, psychology, and women’s studies; one woman had experiences as an affirmative action officer of a university.

The doctoral students in the university in the United States who responded to my invitations for interviews were diverse on many levels. They were men and women who identified with ethnicities such as Latinos, white Americans, and international students; they studied in various fields such as natural sciences, engineering, social sciences, and education. In comparison, the doctoral students who responded to my invitation in Japan were mainly international and Japanese men and women students who had lived abroad during their high school years. These students studied in the fields of social sciences, international health, and education.

Findings

Taboos Between Doctoral Students and Their Doctoral Advisors: What They're Not Talking About and Why They're Not Talking

It is not my goal to become a professor

One topic that frequently came up in interviews, both among students studying in the United States and Japan was this: they would not tell their advisors that they did *not* want to become professors. Engineering students were the exception in both countries, where working in this field outside the university after degree completion seemed to be accepted openly.

The reasons for this widespread opinion of doctoral candidates were based on several assumptions. Specifically, students:

- Did not want to be seen as “not smart enough” to become professors.
- Feared being seen as “less worthy”, and therefore, receiving not financial support or nominations for a fellowship, or research assistantship, or teaching assistantship position in their department.
- Avoided situations in which they might be treated as “second class citizens”. This was a reaction they feared would happen if their advising professor discovered their decision not to become a professor.
- In Japan, students stated that they did not want to be seen as failures and possible academic dropouts, if they explained that they did not want to become a professor.

In general, fear of being considered a “second class citizen” if one does not aspire to become a professor was more prominent among social science and humanities students than among students in health and biological sciences.

Family Planning and Pregnancy

A second taboo that had been mentioned by women students in both countries was the topic of pregnancy, either planned or unexpected. Instead, these students preferred to let nature (in other words, their bodies) reveal their circumstances. Only if their advisors were women, and if these women professors had children, did the students feel that they would discuss the topic of pregnancy. In both countries, women doctoral students feared that traditional stereotypes about the role of women in socie-

ty and academia, of being a mother and not continuing their studies, would result in a negative attitude towards them.

Hearing this fear in students' interviews prompted the following question: Why, in the 21st century, was there still a perceived taboo around the topic of pregnancy? In response, the students said they feared that their advisors would assume that they would drop out of their program before degree completion; in other words, the students feared they would be seen as people who did not take their studies seriously. In general, the doctoral students I interviewed wanted to avoid negative judgments and any possible negative predispositions from their professors.

My exploratory journey revealed a complicated and delicate relationship with certain topics that seemed to prohibit² discussion between doctoral supervisors and doctoral students. Seen from the outside, the advisor-advisee relationship seems to be amicable, rather than entirely professional. However, the fear about possible negative assumptions, and the fear of a break in this relationship, sits just below the surface; this underlying fear turns topics, such as not aspiring to a professoriate and combining family and pursuing doctoral studies, into taboo topics.

These two taboo topics relate closely to the findings from the empirical studies on doctoral career paths that we have undertaken at the Center for Studies in Innovation and Research in Graduate Education (CIRGE) at the University at Washington, Seattle. In a book chapter that summarized key findings from these studies, I referred to the perceptions about these two taboos and other key topics as “common, but outdated assumptions of U.S. doctoral education” (Nerad, 2009).

Specifically, these empirical studies showed that in the 21st century, many doctoral programs in the United States are still structured, as if they were meant to prepare students for life as university professors. This situation is based on one of several of common erroneous assumptions that are still in the minds of faculty and higher education policymakers, and are perpetuated by the dominant media. Further outdated assumptions on doctoral education are:

- All doctoral students who study for a PhD want to become professors.
- Professorial positions are highly desirable, and the best doctoral recipients become professors.

² The word “taboo” is defined as “a social or religious custom prohibiting or forbidding discussion of a particular practice or forbidding association with a particular person, place, or thing”. (http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/taboo Accessed 9/25)

- Everybody who successfully completes a PhD will most likely choose the very best academic job offer, unconstrained by relationship and family concerns.
- Professors enjoy the highest job satisfaction compared to any other employment group.

Findings from the three national PhD career path studies have shown that these assumptions are based on anecdotal information rather than on empirical findings (Nerad 2009, p. 80). For example, one-fourth of all doctoral students and about one-half of science and engineering students did not intend to become professors at the time of degree completion.³

The assumption that the best people become professors did not hold true either. On the contrary, findings from these three studies indicated that traditional ‘quality’ indicators of PhD holders, such as short time to degree completion and multiple publications, were insufficient or inadequate factors in predicting professorial career outcomes.⁴

As indicated by the three CIRGE studies, not all PhD holders can make career choices independent from relationship and family considerations. In fact, a large majority of PhD candidates in these studies were in committed relationships or were married at the time of degree comple-

³ The *PhD 10 Years Later* study, a U.S. study of career paths of PhDs, showed that only about half of all doctoral recipients surveyed strived to become professors. There existed a great variation of student aspirations by their field of study. The largest majority of English and political science PhDs (81 % and 72 % respectively) wanted to become professors at the time of degree completion, while only 19 % of students in electrical engineering and 32 % of students in biochemistry had academic career ambitions (Nerad & Cerny, 1997). Of the 81 % of English PhD students who aspired to become professors, 64 % reached this goal 10-15 years later. However, of all English PhD recipients in the study, only 55 % were professors 15 years after degree completion. Also, 71 % of art history PhDs students surveyed wanted to become professors at the time of degree completion (Nerad et al., 2004). In addition to findings from this survey, findings about student aspirations also varied for survey participants in the study, *Social Science PhDs – 5 Years Later*. Specifically, the rate at which students aspired to become professors at the time of degree completion ranged from 57 % (for students in the field of geography) to 78 % (for students in the field of history).

⁴ Measurement by traditional standards, specifically of short time to degree completion and multiple publications at time of degree completion, to predict which students became professors held true only for students in the fields of English and political science, according to the *PhD 10 Years Later* study. The logistic regression analysis indicated that short time to degree completion and number of publications at the time of completion was not associated with tenure status held true for PhD holders in biochemistry, ventricular engineering, and mathematics. In contrast, shorter time to degree completion was associated with acquisition of tenure in academic roles for PhD holders in computer science. Among PhD holders in art history though, time to degree completion was not associated with acquisition of tenured positions, the number of publications at time of degree completion was positively associated with the likelihood of holding tenure, but only for women PhDs in this field.

tion. Also, two-thirds of women PhDs were partnered with someone who had invested much into his or her education, and held PhDs, or were medical doctors or doctors of jurisprudence. In other words, the women in these studies had partners who could not easily give up their jobs and find another similar job in another location. However, only one-third of the male PhDs in these studies were in relationships where their partner had completed the same amount of education; as a result, for most of the men PhDs their partners were more mobile than the women's partners.

As a result, most of the men in these three studies were not much concerned about their partner's professional mobility, whereas most women needed and did consider good job opportunities for their partners as part of their choice for their first post-PhD job. This discrepancy explains that after degree completion, during the time of job search, the challenges of being a dual-career couple arose for women PhD holders more than for men PhD holders. These findings imply that every PhD holder may not choose the academic job offer at the most prestigious institution, which is often considered the "best" academic job. In short, findings show that the pursuit of post-PhD careers is far more complicated for women than for men, not only because of the issue of pregnancy, but also because of job availability and geographic mobility.

Additional Taboos Between Doctoral Students and Their Doctoral Supervisors in Japan

Finding taboos in doctoral education in Japan proved particularly difficult for me, a `foreigner, whose interview subjects were mostly limited to international students who were studying for their PhDs in Japan and spoke fluent Japanese as well as fluent English or German. From these interviews, three taboo topics emerged:

- Contradicting a student's doctoral supervisor.
- Talking about private matters with a doctoral supervisor.
- Changing doctoral supervisors.

Cultural etiquette may be one reason why students considered these three topics as taboos rather than only difficult topics. According to cultural etiquette, students considered it offensive to disagree with a person who was much older and had far more experience, knowledge, ability, and higher professional status than them. As a display of adhering to cultural etiquettes, students honored the hierarchy of their relationship with their doctoral supervisors by avoiding both discussion of personal matters and direct-

ly contradicting them. According to these students, changing dissertation advisors in Japan was near impossible, given cultural norms, and was avoided at all costs.

The reason for this social behavioral rule was explained as relating back to Japan as an island society, that is, a village, a *mura syakai*, in which one needs to get along with everybody. Further, the seniority principle is still ingrained in Japanese society, and accordingly, students do not disagree with their advisors based on the fact that their advisors have more academic seniority than they do. According to Davies and Ikeno, in their book, *The Japanese Mind, Understanding Japanese Culture* (2002), any teacher is a person of respect; but according to the students of this study, university professors were particularly respected.

This status hierarchy can be seen in the particular language that doctoral students used when they addressed their professors. They used the most formal and respectful form of honorific language. As part of this status hierarchy, students did not talk about personal matters to their doctoral advisors, as we have mentioned earlier about pregnancy. In Japan, the silence around personal matters within the context of the advisor-advisee relationships is a general one, and does not only apply to the topic of pregnancy.

Further, in explaining this phenomenon of taboos, we have to understand that once doctoral students complete their degrees, even if they do not become professors themselves, they will remain in the same research field as their advisors. This means that they will socialize in the same academic community, and therefore, students shun the opportunity to change their advisors.

Searching for taboos in doctoral education in Japan brings the importance of culture to the forefront of this discussion. The etymology of the English term *taboo* dates back to early explorers and early anthropologists, so to speak. For example, the British explorer, James Cook (1728–1779), described religious rituals of islanders of the South Pacific in the 18th century, and talked about taboos. Mary Douglas (1921–2007), an influential British anthropologist and cultural theorist, made clear how societal context and social history is essential in understanding taboos. In her best-known book, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (first published 1966), Douglas developed two themes around taboos. She argues that taboos are “spontaneous devices for protecting the distinctive category of the universe” (p. xi), that is, taboos protect the local consensus on how the world is organized. She explains, “taboos depend on a form of community-wide complicity” (p. xii).

The second theme she identified speaks to the cognitive discomfort caused by ambiguity around local consensus, stating, “Taboo confronts the ambiguous and shunts it into the category of the sacred...Taboo is a spontaneous coding practice which sets up a vocabulary of spatial limits and physical and verbal signals to hedge around vulnerable relations” (p. xiii). Both themes can be applied as a way to understand the relationship between Japanese doctoral students and their advisors. Students wanted and felt they needed to comply with their cultural and academic norms. They also perceived that they were in a vulnerable, that is, dependable, relationship with their advisors, and therefore, must adhere to the unspoken norms about personal matters, and contradicting or changing their advisors.

Searching for taboos in doctoral education in two distinct cultures illuminates the significance of the cultural context in studying taboos. As the interviews showed, there were differences in what was considered taboo in Japan and the United States. Japanese doctoral students considered contradicting one’s doctoral supervisor, talking about private matters to their advisor, and changing doctoral advisors as taboos, whereas students in the United States did not mention these issues as potential taboo topics. Though doctoral students in the United States considered changing dissertation advisors anxiety provoking, they did not consider it a taboo. Similarly, contradicting one’s advisor or talking about private matters, except in the specific case of pregnancy, were not considered taboos in the United States.

Taboos Amongst Doctoral Students: What They're Not Talking About and Why They're Not Talking

During my preliminary inquiries, I also learned about topics that doctoral students do not discuss amongst each other. These topics were:

- The specific financial support they had received.
- Their personal academic achievements.
- The dynamic between their doctoral advisor and her or his doctoral advisee group.

Why would doctoral students refrain from talking about the financial support they received at a given time? The students I talked to explained that they felt embarrassed if they had received a scholarship and their peers did not. If they received a higher stipend than a peer in their cohort, they did not talk about it in order to avoid possible resentment from their

peers. They wished to be accepted among their peers, and did not want to set themselves apart. Regarding academic achievement, women in Japan mentioned specifically that they would not discuss exam grades with their boyfriends if they were both in the same program. It seemed that women tended to downplay their academic accomplishments in mixed gender groups. When I probed further into whether such silence around financial issues and academic achievements also existed within their doctoral advisee group, I learned that students never discussed the dynamic that played out in their doctoral seminars between their advisor and his or her advisees. Both men and women advisees wanted to avoid competition in this closed circle, and as a result, any differential treatment was not a topic of discussion among them.

Input From a University Therapist

Motivated to discover whether my findings on taboos were unique, I connected with a psychologist at a university in the United States who, during her long professional career, worked with many doctoral students from a multitude of disciplines and fields. She confirmed the taboos amongst students of discussing the dynamics both within an advisee group and with an advisor. In addition to these taboos, she referred to two phenomena that she frequently observed among doctoral students:

- Imposter syndrome.
- Winnowing process.

Imposter syndrome

The impostor syndrome is sometimes called the impostor phenomenon or fraud syndrome. Despite external evidence of students' competence such as an excellent dissertation proposal, those with this syndrome remain convinced that they were frauds and did not deserve the success they achieved. Proof of success, such as the acceptance of a paper in a prestigious journal, is dismissed as the result of luck, timing, or as a result of deceiving others into thinking they are more intelligent and competent than they believe themselves to be.⁵

The psychologist I spoke with recounted that doctoral students, particularly those who are the first in their families to go to university (termed in the United States as first-generation college-goers) and students of col-

⁵ See *Imposter Syndrome* article on CalTech Counseling Center website.

or, did not dare talk about feeling like a fraud or feeling like they didn't deserve to be in a doctoral program to others. These students, she explained, regarded these topics as very forbidden, or in other words, a hidden taboo. They would only tell the therapist about their feelings that they thought of themselves as frauds."

The winnowing process

The Webster's dictionary explains this term as follows: "to remove people or things that are less important, desirable, etc. from a larger group or list: to make a list of possible choices smaller by removing the less desirable choices".⁶

A tradition exists at research universities for faculty to pass down their accumulated expertise, be it a certain school of thought, or a certain research method, or to carry on the laboratory or research center to his or her students, like a father passing on to "son" or "daughter" their specific accumulated expertise. Through talking with students, the psychologist encountered the distress or guilt that students felt towards the end of graduate school when some students were tacitly chosen as the heirs of the professor's expertise, and some were not.

For the preferred or chosen student, professors paid more careful attention to their work and to the development of social relationships with the faculty, as well as the professional connections that come from these relationships. This experience is more complex than simple favoritism. According to the psychologist her patients frequently talked about this winnowing process during therapy sessions; however, students did not talk about it with their cohort of peer students or with faculty.

In short, the psychologist pointed out and explained that a winnowing down process does occur late in a student's graduate school experience. This term is similar to the German idiom, *die Spreu vom Weizen trennen*, which translates directly to mean, "separate the wheat from the chaff". Because of this silent process of choosing an academic heir, doctoral students fear that their advisors have favorites, and that they may not be the favorite ones. It is only the psychologist who learned about students' fear relating to group dynamics between advisors and their advisees, and that was only behind the psychologist's door.

⁶ The term *winnowing process* comes from the field of agriculture, and means: "to remove the unwanted coverings of seeds from grain by throwing the grain up in the air and letting the wind blow the unwanted parts away".

Taboos Among Doctoral Advisors: What They're Not Talking About and Why They're Not Talking

Inquiring about taboo topics with faculty, who were advisors of doctoral students, on what they may not discuss with colleagues in their program led to an engaging discussion on one particularly dicey subject in the US:⁷

- The difficulty in distinguishing what it means being collegial and having a different opinion on quality standards in connection with the dissertation of a colleague's advisee.

My search for taboos among doctoral advisees revealed that faculty did not avoid entire topics from open discussion among colleagues, as was the case with students. Instead, faculty taboos proved to be subtle distinctions and judgments on where to draw the line on a sensitive issue; for example, it was difficult for faculty to determine how much to share about his or her thinking, for example on quality standards on a dissertation, due to conventional departmental standards or perceived academic norms. Faculty also found it difficult to draw the boundary line in delicate relationships with their colleagues so that they could uphold their reputation as collegial.

Being collegial. The dictionary defines collegiality as colleagues who are united explicitly in a common purpose, who respect each other's abilities to work toward that purpose,⁸ and who work together in a friendly manner in a way in which responsibility is shared between several people.

Traditionally in academic circles, there has been a strong element of *collegiality* in the governance of universities. While topics such as the principle of academic freedom is discussed openly among faculty, the topic of drawing boundaries around collegiality is not. The professors I interviewed indicated that when they were new to doctoral advising, they did not receive advice or mentoring by senior faculty on these sensitive matters inherent in the doctoral advising process. As novices to doctoral advising, they did not ask how to handle potential conflicts.

⁷ As stated earlier, few male professors in Japan responded to my invitation to discuss taboo topics. The ensuing discussions in Japan circled around the physical appearance of professors. For instance, they reported that coming to work unshaven or wearing slippers was not socially acceptable, and yet, no one would talk openly with their colleagues about this unwritten code; instead, the professors called this topic a taboo.

⁸ The definition for *collegiality* as used in this paper was sourced from Wikipedia: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Collegiality>.

Disagreeing with a colleague on a student's dissertation was considered a delicate topic capable of affecting their collegial reputation. As a result, this issue has slipped into a possible taboo topic, which, as the faculty I interviewed informed me, is not addressed with colleagues. Instead, in my experience, faculty members tend to consult confidants outside the university for advice.

In light of what I found through this journey, I am motivated to asking: Do doctoral students and faculty apply self-censorship?

Conclusion

It is not my aim here to give a comprehensive explanation for fears of faculty and doctoral students as I described above, or to discuss fears with a psychoanalytical lens⁹, or to discuss fears from a cultural, anthropological point of view of shame and guilt.¹⁰ Rather, the purpose of my journey was to collect clues and ideas of topics that have the potential to be silenced and hidden in doctoral education. As a researcher of higher education with a sociological and political science blended background, I am more drawn to examining the connection between this topic and what Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky write about journalists in their 1998 book, *Manufacturing Consent*, rather than revisiting cultural-anthropological concepts of shame and guilt and whether the characterization of Japan as a “shame culture” and the U.S. as a “guilt culture” is correct or not.

Returning to Herman and Chomsky, these authors argue that corporate ownership of news media encourages systematic self-censorship, owing to market forces. They define self-censorship as “an act of censoring or classifying one's own work, out of fear of, or deference to, the sensibilities of others, without overt pressure from any specific party or institution of authority”. In order to conform to the expectations of the market, so they argue, journalists consciously or unconsciously avoid topics that might anger media users (customers) or media owners. In doing so, journalists feel that they are protecting her or his success and career, either directly or indirectly. For example, a journalist might believe that his or her book will be more profitable if it does not contain offensive material. The authors call this act *soft censorship*.

⁹ The psychoanalytic lens I refer to is Freud's idea that guilt is an adult emotion in modern society, while shame is an emotion of children. See also Scheff, T., (2000). Shame and the Social Bond. *Sociological Theory*. 18: 84-98.

¹⁰ Ruth Benedict typified Japan as a shame culture and the West as a guilt culture in her famous work, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (1946) at the end of World War II.

Herman¹¹ and Chomsky¹² related soft censorship to conforming to market values. Today, universities have become entrepreneurial (Clark 1998, 2001) and knowledge has become a commodity that can be capitalized on in profit-oriented activities (Slaughter and Rhoads 2004, 2007). In my opinion, this changed university environment where, under the accountability principle, nearly every activity has become auditable (Strathern 2000) and calculable in terms of quantifiable outputs, the phenomenon of soft censorship is now more common among students and academic staff, in spite of the existence of academic freedom for faculty. This principle of soft censorship also applies to doctoral education, particularly in the relationship between advisees and advisors.

Let me make clear what I mean by adopting the above scenario, which was meant for the media process and journalists, to doctoral education. In order to conform to the perceived expectation of their doctoral advisors, students consciously or unconsciously avoid discussing topics that might contradict the expectations of their advisors in order to complete their PhDs and protect their assistantships. Students might also censor their dissertations by avoiding topics they believe contradict their advisors, out of fear that it might affect the outcome of their dissertation, whether it will be accepted or not. As explained earlier, soft censorship may also occur in faculty in order that they remain collegial to their peers and adhere to departmental accountability expectations. For example, faculty may not voice their opinions fully or strongly about the quality of students' exams or dissertations when these students are the advisees of a colleague.

Having undertaken this exploratory journey, it is not surprising to find that taboos in doctoral education are created within specific social and organizational contexts. However, it seems that the taboo around career aspirations responds to academic expectations and conventions of the past, which linger on in the attitudes of faculty and are picked up by their students. As shown earlier in the CIRGE *PhD 10 Year Later* study, a U.S. career path survey, in the discipline of English for example, of all doctoral candidates who aspired to become professors only about two-thirds (64 %) held professorships 10-15 years later. (Of the entire English cohort surveyed, only 55 % was found to be professors.)

In reality, in both Japan and the US, the forces of globalization, the ever-changing labor market, demographic shifts, and changing policies in higher education have altered the university experience fundamentally

¹¹ Edward Herman was a professor of finance and a media specialist.

¹² Noam Chomsky was a professor of linguistics and a media specialist.

both for professors and students. (Nerad & Evans, 2014; Nerad, 2011; Nerad & Heggelund, 2008). Today universities operate in a world that follows the concept of the knowledge economy, in which growth is dependent on the quantity, quality, and accessibility of the information available.

The taboos that I identified between doctoral students and advisors, amongst students, and amongst advisors in two countries each with substantially different cultures, in my view, cannot solely be understood in terms of cultural difference. Referring back to the definition of taboo as a

“broad agreement that ... relate[s] to objects and actions that are significant for the social order and that belong to the general system of social control (Encyclopedia Britannica Online)”,

I wonder whether the taboos I found are a way for faculty and students to uphold outwardly the status quo of the academic world's inner social order, specifically, the conventional relationship between students and faculty, among students, and among colleagues. Even as taboos seem to maintain conventional relationships, underlying market-driven factors such as efficiency in PhD production and striving for world-class reputation are changing these relationships. I am interested to find out how long it will take before the taboos I have encountered begin to change within the changing academic world.

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Tabus und Tabuverletzungen an Hochschulen

Margret Bülow-Schramm:

Neue Gedankengänge provozieren. Vorwort der
2. Vorsitzenden der Gesellschaft für Hochschulforschung.....7

Sigrid Metz-Göckel, Margret Bülow-Schramm, Marion Kamphans:

(Un)aufgelöste Ambivalenzen. Zur Funktion und Analyse
von Tabus in der Hochschule9

Maresi Nerad:

Searching for Taboos in Doctoral Education. An Exploratory Journey17

Bernd Kleimann:

Tabus in der Governance von Universitäten.....33

Sigrid Metz-Göckel:

Der schöne Schein wissenschaftlicher Begutachtung oder
zur Unterwanderung meritokratischer Beurteilungen.....43

Meike Sophia Baader, Svea Korff:

Chancengleichheit durch strukturierte
Promotionsförderung – ein Tabu in der Umsetzung?58

Volker Müller-Benedict, Thomas Gaens:

Sind Examensnoten vergleichbar? Und was, wenn Noten
immer besser werden? Der Versuch eines Tabubruchs79

Gerd Grözingen:

Einflüsse auf die Notengebung an deutschen Hochschulen.
Eine Analyse am Beispiel der Wirtschaftswissenschaften94

Katrin List, Thomas Feltes:

Sexuelle Gewalt an Hochschulen115

<i>Werner Krauß, Ramona Lenz, Constance von Rüden, Sarah Weber:</i> Can the Postdoc Speak? Ein Erfahrungsbericht aus den Grauzonen universitärer Drittmittelwelten	129
--	-----

<i>Felizitas Sagebiel:</i> Peer Review-Verfahren. Legitimation oder ein geschlechtergerechtes Verfahren zur transparenten Qualitätssicherung?	143
---	-----

<i>Oliver Dimbath, Stefan Böschen:</i> Institutionalisierter Skeptizismus der Wissenschaft. Eine explorierende Studie zu Rezensionen als Kritikform	158
---	-----

FORUM

<i>Karl Weber, Wolfgang Jütte, Markus Walber:</i> Kommunikative Praktiken in den Erziehungswissenschaften. Eine explorative Studie	173
--	-----

PUBLIKATIONEN

Rezension: Otto Hüther/Georg Krücken: Hochschulen. Fragestellungen, Ergebnisse und Perspektiven der sozialwissenschaftlichen Hochschulforschung (<i>Anna Kosmützky</i>).....	188
--	-----

<i>Peer Pasternack, Daniel Hechler:</i> Bibliografie: Wissenschaft & Hochschulen in Ostdeutschland seit 1945	192
--	-----

Autorinnen & Autoren	213
---------------------------------------	-----

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